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DISTINCTIVE FEATURES OF WRITTEN ENGLISH

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One of the most recent revolutions in the teaching of English as a second language is a renewed emphasis on the teaching of writing skills. The wave of "language is speech" (interpreted in practice by many to mean that language is *only* speech) having passed by, ESL teachers are recognizing that the practice of postponing instruction in writing until after considerable fluency in speaking has been achieved is not consonant with the immediate needs of many ESL students

As writing recovers importance, teachers of English as a second language are also coming to realize that good writing is more than just speech written down, that writing requires special teaching approaches and materials designed to develop in the speaker the additional skills necessary for good writing. Especially in the case of expository prose—the type of writing most often required in professional and academic settings and the type of writing referred to in this article—it is not acceptable to assume that a writer merely writes down the sentences that he imagines he would say as a speaker. Neither can it be assumed that "the differences between spoken and written languages are for the most part obvious and need not be commented on here" (Carroll: 1964, 47).

It is possible, of course, to write down what someone has said or plans to say. It is also possible to read aloud what someone has written. Neither of these two acts, however, is typical of the common uses of speaking and writing. The simple test of trying to transcribe a lively conversation between two or more discussants should be enough to demonstrate this fact. Even though the conversation may be academic in nature, the transcription will be far different from what might have been produced had the participants been asked to write down their views. Another test, the reading aloud of a passage from a textbook or journal to a companion or audience (often

CONTENTS

Distinctive Features of Written English By Lynn E. Henrichsen	Page 1
In-Class Dynamics in TESL By Jason B. Alter	Page 4
An ESL-ABE Video Tape Bank	Page 5
Report on the 1978 TESOL Convention by Thomas G. Huebner	Page 9
The Strip Story: Making it Work by Mark James	Page 11

putting them to sleep) should convince any doubter that expository prose is not "merely speech written down and frozen."

The discovery that the written language is different from the spoken language is not new, of course. Over a decade ago, William G. Moulton explained that "once a written form of a language has evolved, it tends to some extent to develop into a special language of its own, partly divorced from speech. Written English is by no means identical with spoken English" (Moulton: 1966, 15).

Moulton also noted that special instruction beyond that dedicated to teaching the student to speak is needed if a student is to learn to write well in a second language. "Though all of us know spoken English marvelously well by the time we enter school, we spend a good part of the next twelve years learning the proper form of written English We cannot expect to learn to write another language properly (except in its simplest forms, as in personal letters) without a comparable amount of training" (Moulton: 1966, 16).

Special instruction in the writing of English must begin with the assumption that writing and speaking in English are somewhat different systems requiring different skills. Making this assumption, however, is not enough. It is also necessary to specify the ways in which writing and speaking are different and the ways in which they are the same. As might be expected, the more one gets into the task of describing the differences between the two systems, the more involved it becomes. Fortunately, though, most of the more abstract differences can be traced to three quite concrete sources: medium, time, and distance.

MEDIUM

Medium is perhaps the most obvious of the differences between speaking and writing. The natural medium of speech, of course, is the air which surrounds us and the vibrations it carries from mouth to ear. Writing, on the other hand, is most often done in black and white on paper. This very basic and very obvious difference leads to others which are less apparent.

The first of these differences is that a system of writing and conventions of spelling must be learned, a rather formidable task in English but one which cannot be overlooked or passed over lightly in teaching ESL, especially in the case of students whose native writing system is not the Roman alphabet. When the orthographic system reflects the phonological system of the language as imperfectly as it does in English, instruction in this area is particularly important.

Another important difference is that writing lacks the non-verbal clues to meaning which do a great deal to facilitate or enhance communication in face-to-face situations. Hand gestures, body postures, and facial expressions—all noticeably missing in writing—must be compensated for by some other means if miscommunication is to be avoided.

Also missing is the intonation of the spoken language. For example, *You like oysters* can be a yes-no question in spoken English when given a rising, question intonation (*You like oysters?*). When written, however, it is difficult for it to be anything but a statement unless preceded by a *Do*. The auxiliary shift which results in *Do you like oysters?* is a simple example of only one of numerous syntactic devices which are employed in written English to compensate for the lack of intonation.

Punctuation is another way of compensating for the absence of phonological suprasegmentals in written English and constitutes one more complex system which must be learned by the writer. Leaving out the commas in *Grandpa, said grandma, snores a lot* results in a very different meaning—*Grandpa said grandma snores a lot*. If the pauses and different intonations present in a spoken utterance are not indicated by punctuation in the written version, miscommunication may result. Important as these devices are, however, the student writer seldom learns them through exposure alone. Quite obviously, if he is to use them correctly in facilitating communication and avoiding miscommunication, he must receive instruction in their proper use.

Another very important difference related to the different media used in speaking

and writing is a result of the stress-timed rhythm common to spoken English. As spoken words are compressed, contracted, and reduced to fit into the nearly equal intervals between sentence stresses, they often come dangerously close to disappearing. Very often, when a person writes, some of these reduced function words (which are dropped or nearly dropped in normal speech) are omitted. For example, the sentence *I had better go* is often spoken as *I'd better go* with a reduced, unstressed /d/. Writing down what is spoken may result in something like *I better go* with the reduced function word omitted. Although spoken English requires the reduction of such words, their omission in writing is considered a serious error. Written English produces more equality in the representation of words, and even the unstressed function words must be present in writing.

A final difference stemming from the medium used for written communication is that writing is semi-permanent, not transient. The spoken word is fleeting, but writing lends itself to preservation for indefinite lengths of time, ranging from a few minutes to several centuries. Until the advent of audio recording technology in the last few decades, this permanency was a unique and distinct advantage of writing, allowing languages (such as Latin and Hebrew) which have been virtually dead for the purpose of oral communication to continue to be used in written form and, in the case of Hebrew, revived in spoken form (Rabin: 1971, 101). Writing's traditional ability to be preserved allows the writer a number of advantages, but it also burdens him with extra responsibilities and difficulties, some of which will be discussed in the following sections on time and distance.

TIME

Writing not only lasts longer than speech; it also takes longer to produce. That people write considerably more slowly than they speak is not a very startling observation. Nevertheless, this basic difference leads to another important distinction which must be made. Because writing takes more time to produce and its product may be preserved, it is often expected to exhibit evidence of more thought and care.

At the same time, it loses much of the spontaneity of speech. While conversations often ramble without direction, writing is usually expected to evidence purposeful, careful selection and logical organization of information—factors considerably less important in common conversation. In much writing, however, thoughtful organization is not only possible due to the reduced speed of writing, it is expected.

DISTANCE

Very often, writing is used for long distance communication. The distance may be more than physical, however. Temporal, physical, and social distances all enter into consideration.

TEMPORAL DISTANCE. As has already been discussed, writing may be preserved indefinitely. What is written today may be read tomorrow or years from now. This preservability tends to make writing more linguistically conservative. Written English seems to be more insulated against fads in lexicon and usage than is spoken English. Few people continue to say *Gee, that's swell!* today, although the expression was commonly heard a generation or two ago. Even in the phrase's heyday, however, it would have been difficult to find it in serious prose outside of dialog.

The ability to communicate across time, into the future, places a special responsibility on the writer to organize his thoughts and to present them carefully. With this responsibility comes an advantage unique to writing—written English may be edited. That is, it may be written down, thought over, and then improved by rewriting. The writer may edit the original material shortly after writing it, or he may put aside what he has written, returning to it after time has elapsed in order to take a fresh look at it. Editing is a luxury not available in most speaking situations. Hence, the false starts, fragments, hesitations, digressions, and ungrammaticalness common in conversations are usually overlooked, but they are not so easily excused in a piece of writing. Finished writing exhibits little tolerance for such features. Students must learn that editing

(continued on page 12)

Distinctive Features of Written English

(continued from page 3)

is not just a luxury; it is a responsibility.

Another time-related advantage of writing is that the material is still there for the reader to go over again after he has finished reading a sentence or passage. When the medium of communication is paper and ink, *read-back* is possible. Thus, if a reader does not understand a word, he may pause and look it up. If he fails to grasp the meaning of a difficult sentence or a heavy passage, without bothering the writer he may go back and read it again. It is theorized that this ability to read and re-read results in a diminished need for repetition in writing. Indeed, although the hypothesis remains to be proven conclusively, an important difference between speaking and writing may be the reduced redundancy in writing allowed for by the particular properties of its medium.

The readback feature is a mixed blessing for the reader, however, for the writer may take advantage of it, loading sentences with compounds and complex embeddings to the point where they may be nearly incomprehensible to a reader accustomed to the types of sentences used in speaking. The student of written English needs to develop the skill of comprehending structurally loaded sentences. Then, he must learn to produce them correctly, putting the elements together in the right way.

In addition to this structural loading, writing's readback feature also allows considerably more semantic loading than is permissible in speech. "Ideas that are too confusing or too complex to be communicated orally can often be communicated in writing. In Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*, the Red Queen asks Alice, 'What's one and one and one and one and one and one and one and one and one and one and one?' 'I don't know,' replies Alice. 'I lost count.' 'She can't do addition,' the Red Queen concludes. Very likely this sentence would not have given Alice a bit of trouble if it had been written down" (Nilsen and Nil- sen: 1978, 3-4)

PHYSICAL DISTANCE. As writer and reader may be separated by time, they also may be separated physically. In fact, the physical separation of the message originator and the message recipient is a condition under which most writing takes place.

Because the reader seldom has direct contact with the writer (who may be miles or years away), only one person writes at a time, so the writer receives little feedback on whether or not he is really communicating. Conversely, if a reader does not understand a piece of writing it is usually quite difficult for him to question the author about it. Therefore, the author of a message presented in written form must anticipate the questions a reader may have. He must also present his message clearly or it may not be understood. The clarity which results from care in writing and the anticipation of possible trouble spots is an important feature of good writing.

The ability to communicate over great distances, which traditionally has been available only through writing, has resulted in a leveling of dialectical differences in written English. Most regional variations in spoken English disappear when the written form of the language is employed. This standardization is due in part, of course, to the elimination of the phonological component in writing. All dialectical differences, however, are not phonological. Many of the lexical and structural elements peculiar to the English spoken in specific geographical areas are seldom found in writing outside of quoted dialog. *I'd just as leave stay*, for example (Johnston: 1978, 2C), a usage found in Utah English, is seldom seen in writing, even in Utah—not because it can't be written; it just isn't. The reason it doesn't appear in written form is that a more formal register, which excludes such regional usages, is called for in most expository prose.

SOCIAL DISTANCE. Situations which call for written English often call for a formal kind of English. A spoken *Here is the book*

you asked for becomes *Enclosed please find the book you requested* when put into writing. One of the reasons for this shift could be the physical and temporal distance between the writer and reader. It is often difficult for a writer to predict exactly who will end up reading a memo or report. It may be a colleague or it may be the boss. In the latter case, some social distance must be bridged.

The register of written communication intended for a broad, general audience is often raised to account for the social level of all possible readers. An invitation to an important social event (such as a wedding or a graduation) is almost always worded in the most formal way.

In addition to the distance between writer and reader, there is very often still another distance involved in much writing—that which the writer puts between himself and his work. The first person is rarely employed in serious prose, the more objective third person being preferred. This impersonal objectivity is another important feature of the written English expected in most professional and academic situations.

What the student of writing must realize is that different registers exist and that “the written language is a separate system with its own set of keys” (Bowen: 1972, 414). The registers used in most expository prose range from semiformal to hyperformal and are well above the usual level of a casual conversation. To be effective, the writer must become familiar with the appropriate register for the purpose at hand and its accompanying style, or his writing will not be acceptable. In many school situations, for example, “student writing is not expected to reflect a highly personal style. It must, rather, reflect common standards of form and style to a considerable extent. Teachers giving writing assignments usually assume these standards. The results have not always been encouraging” (Dykstra: 1978, 1).

A great many of the structural differences between spoken and written English may be attributed to this shift in register and the resultant writing style. A number of these differences (Eskey: 1975, 212-214) are presented here in a very abbreviated form. It is not just the occurrence of these features,

but also the high frequency of their use that characterizes written English. They may occur in speech occasionally, but not to the extent that they do in edited expository prose.

Question Nominals

The question is whether Michelangelo was a painter.

Factive Nominals

That Michelangelo was a sculptor is a well-known fact.

Infinitive Nominals

For Michelangelo to come to Rome was the earnest desire of the Pope.

Gerundive Nominals

His having worked so tirelessly in Rome did not prevent his accepting another commission in Florence.

Nominalized Verb Phrases

Infinitive—To paint your own portrait is quite a challenge.

Gerundive—Painting is good for one's peace of mind.

Action Nominals

The rapid painting of the Italians surprised us all.

Abstract Nominals

We were puzzled by the sudden disappearance of our guide.

Relative Clauses

Restrictive—The tourists who spend too much money should leave.

Non-Restrictive—The tourists, who spend too much money, should leave.

Appositives (long)

Jones, who was a grammarian, was hanged first.

Participials

Jones, being a grammarian, was hanged first.

Inversions

The girl, I saw, was Mary. (Not The girl I saw was Mary but I saw that the girl was Mary.)

Seldom has John made such a mess of an exam. (John has seldom made such a mess of an exam.)

Familiar Terms Put to Misleading New Uses

However hard he tried, John couldn't

please Mary.

An understanding of the various differences between spoken and written English is important to both the teacher and student of writing. The need for organization and clarity, the many orthographic devices required in writing, the reduced tolerance for errors, the responsibility of editing, the different register common to much written English, and the distinctive structural features of edited prose must all be called to the attention of the student of English as a second language if he is to achieve an acceptable level of proficiency in the very involved task of writing English as a second language.

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